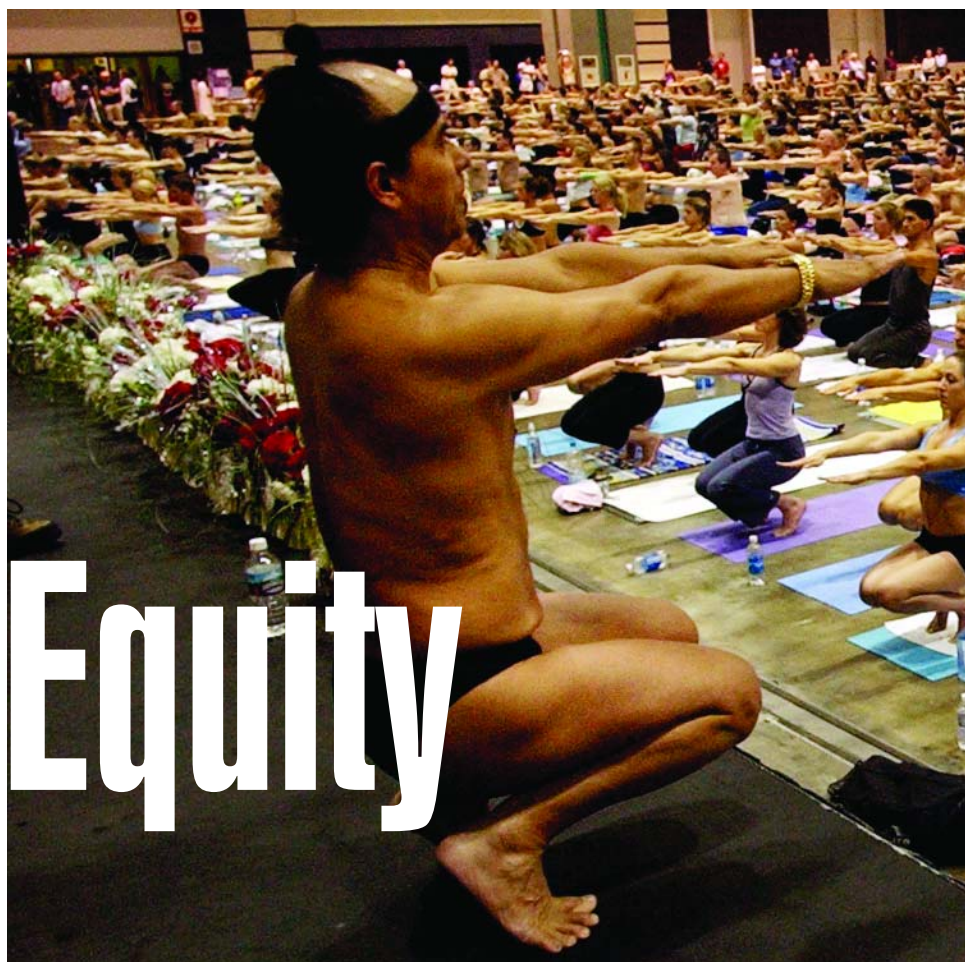


Bikram yoga has taken the United States by storm. Here's why America's hottest fitness trend is just that.

Sweat Equity

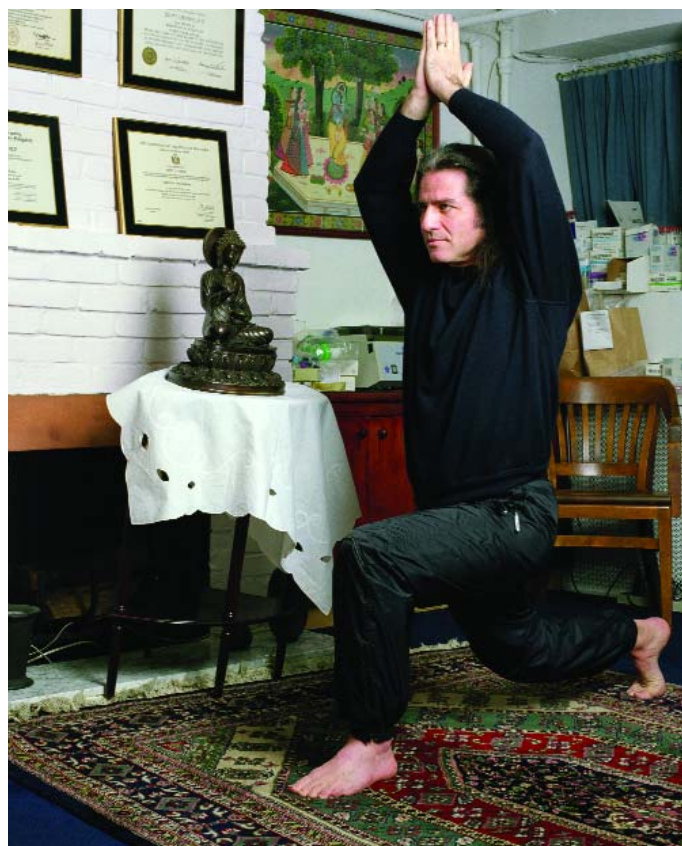
By JENNIFER REINGOLD



I've been to a lot of yoga classes in my life, but none of them prepared me for Bikram yoga, often called "hot yoga." Why, I wondered, was I warned not to eat for several hours beforehand? Why was everyone lining up to buy jumbo-sized jugs of vitamin-infused water at \$2 a pop and carrying a stack of towels with them into the studio? Why were they so intense and quiet?

I soon found out the hard way. Bikram method yoga takes place in a room heated to over 40 degrees Celsius. That is seriously steamy, a temperature more suited to desert dwellers than gym rats. During the 90-minute class, I perspired and fumbled my way through a tortuous series of 26 standing and seated postures, called *asanas*, that somehow managed to engage every cell in my entire body. Sweat poured off me, forming embarrassing little puddles on the floor, and I thought I might be sick in front of my equally sweaty neighbors. Yet we weren't allowed to leave the room, even if we felt nauseous.

"Just sit down on your mat," chirped



Above: Bikram Choudhury (front) leads what was billed as the world's largest yoga class at the Los Angeles Convention Center in 2003.

Left: Dr. Scott Gerson practices classic yoga in his office in New York. He feels newer yoga styles are corrupting the discipline as it gains popularity. An estimated 18 million Americans do yoga exercises regularly.

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Paula, our instructor, in a tone meant to be encouraging. I took her advice quite a few times and prayed for the suffering to be over. Finally, finally, the class ended. Yet as soon as I managed to catch my breath, something strange happened: I felt great.

After first gaining popularity in America during the hippie-era 1960s, yoga has become one of the fastest-growing forms of exercise in the United States, with an estimated 18 million Americans regularly practicing. Most forms of yoga are as old as the hills, ancient forms of stretching and bending that have been part of Indian culture for as long as 5,000 years.

But Bikram yoga is a relatively new variation, founded in the 1960s by Bikram Choudhury, a Calcutta-born yoga and bodybuilding champion who crushed a knee in an accident and was told he'd never walk again. Yoga helped him prove the doctors wrong, and he devoted his life to the exercise. Choudhury moved to the Los Angeles area in the 1970s and over time developed his perspiration-fueled

series of poses, held for exactly the same length of time and done in the same order in every single class. The heat, he claims, increases flexibility, helps heal injuries and flushes toxins out of the body. Bikram yoga is said to have mental benefits as well, exercising what Choudhury calls the five elements of the mind: faith, self control, concentration, determination and patience.

Jennifer Lobo, co-owner of seven Bikram yoga studios on the East Coast, says the class is basic enough for anyone to try, but demanding enough to challenge experts. "This is a full body workout," she says, noting that she easily finished a marathon last year after doing only yoga as training. "You never perfect it. There's always something more you could be doing."

Choudhury got his start in the United States when actress Shirley MacLaine encouraged him to open a studio in Los Angeles called Bikram's Yoga College of India. Hollywood fell in love with the concept, and Choudhury soon became the "guru to the stars," with celebrity devo-

tees including basketball player Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and pop singers Michael Jackson and Madonna. Today, Bikram is one of the fastest-growing styles of yoga, with 715 studios in the United States and around the world. "It's really detoxifying," says Laurie Malen, a personal trainer who's tried Bikram. "I felt like I just cleansed my system."

Although most gurus shun the money-making aspects of their trade, preferring to focus on the spiritual, Choudhury has parlayed his yogi status into a classic success story. In early 2003, Choudhury went so far as to put a copyright on his own method. Since only Bikram-trained teachers are allowed to teach the Bikram method, and he charges \$5,000 for a nine-week training course, this self-made immigrant has made himself quite wealthy: Living proof of inventor Thomas Edison's famous maxim, "Genius is 1 percent inspiration and 99 percent perspiration." □

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